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The Art of Rock and Roll Memoir

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The Art of Rock and Roll Memoir

September 14, 2015

“U2 is what church should be”; so read a line in [Time Magazine](#) when I was 13, a line that confirmed my fledgling belief in U2. I certainly felt elated and worshipful listening to [The Joshua Tree](#), though I wasn’t entirely sure it was right to feel that way. This was just after *The Joshua Tree* had broken U2 worldwide enough to reach rural Minnesota, and just as the album and film [Rattle and Hum](#), according to most critics, showed they had feet of clay.

Personally, I loved the black and white concert footage of *Rattle and Hum*. I loved the impassioned diatribe in “Sunday, Bloody Sunday” so much I used it to pump myself up before junior varsity basketball games.

I first got to see U2 live during the Zoo TV tour, a very different animal. Bono licked the camera; Bono pulled the camera up to his leather-clad crotch; Bono came out dressed up as Mephistopheles. It wasn’t very churchy. Critics loved it. I was 16 and in the tenth row and unsure about these rock and roll antics.

I missed the Pop Mart tour, noted for its spectacle, and the props I saw on later tours—a laser-laced jacket, a swinging microphone, a stage like a spaceship—were perhaps not as grand or silly as the giant lemon.

This time around the U2 tour is called Innocence to Experience and, via home movie and songs new and old, concert-goers are invited on a trip down U2’s own memory lane while live tweets and fan-cams attempt to keep us in the present.

I was also struck by the emotions that I went through at this U2 concert. There was still the old elation, this time consciously tied up with surrender: at one point Bono went to his knees and said that very word (“Surrender to what?” I can hear my catechism teacher say). It sounds contrived, but to be fair, as [Joshua Rothman](#) points out, surrender is where U2 lyrics have been pointing all along.

And there was conviction, as usual. “Sunday, Bloody Sunday” is still like an open wound that brings me into the present moment and forces me to give a shit. Then, too, I’m not sure what American can listen to “Bullet the Blue Sky” and not consider it a call to repentance.

Perhaps more than in the past, though, this concert invited introspection, because if anything “Innocence to Experience” is memoir. Some have called that self-important, but it’s also just plain risky. You don’t go to a rock concert to introspect. It’s also rare. Rock concert memoir is simply not very common, the half-life on rockers being less than the average pair of jeans.

As good memoir does, I to E also provided leaping off points to consider where our own stories might intersect with the one being told on stage. For me, that moment was when confetti in the form of book quotes fell from the ceiling. I found myself gathering them madly, like veritable manna from heaven, to see what works they might be from: *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Divine Comedy*, the Psalms.

Over the years, U2 concerts have put me in the moment, moved me to care, frightened me with tongues and crotches, confused me with Mephistopheles, asked me to surrender, connected me to *Alice in Wonderland*. Is U2 what church should be? I don’t think so. U2 concerts are their own space, the artistic space of a rock and roll concert.